

2012

North to South

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NORTH TO SOUTH

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Mercedes Jelinek
B.F.A, State University of New York, 2007
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professors,

Family,

Friends,

Thank you.

I would have drowned without you.

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ABSTRACT

North to South is a series of photographs that reflect ideas of home and community. The images and video components depict portraits of my neighbors taken over the last two years. The individuals I photographed were crucial to my process, for with their help and a simple homemade photo booth, I found a “home” here in the south.

INTRODUCTION

North to South began with a goal: to meet and photograph individuals who lived in my neighborhood, outside the boundaries of LSU. My tools of choice consist of multiple cameras, a homemade “photo booth” and a sign that reads *Free Photographs for Neighborhood Picture Project*, announcing the project to everyone who passes by.

I chose to use traditional black and white film and a wet darkroom printing process to produce the final images, which I feel contributes a certain nostalgia and preciousness to each image. I work in this classic manner even though silver gelatin printing is commonly seen as outmoded. While it is true that digital media have replaced many photographic processes, I feel strongly that photographs should be touched, shown, cherished, and yet be allowed to degrade over time, just like the moments they capture.

The black and white silver prints are exhibited along with two video components. The first video displays my process: photographing and interacting with the participants. The other video is a slideshow made up of the images that were not printed for the thesis exhibition but nonetheless provide evidence of the strong relationships that developed as a result of the project itself. Together the videos are a poignant liaison between the still images and the viewer.

FROM NORTH

Small-town life was good to me. The town of Madison, Connecticut is a charming place if one can cope with intervals of harsh weather or the occasional jellyfish sting. One can be rather tranquil there while waiting for something exciting to happen, or some notable person or happenstance to come along and save you from the measured boredom. Garrison Keillor describes this small-town mentality:

We spend a good deal of time waiting for something to come along and usually it doesn't. You drive into a small town, park on the main street, get out of your car, and you feel stared at. Faces in the café window and upstairs above the drugstore and the kids on the teeter-totters, they all turn and look, and then they see that you're not the one, and they resume waiting.¹

In this kind of life, one may not see many strangers. The people you encounter are neighbors and classmates, parents and co-workers, friends of friends or relatives. It is polite to greet with a smile those whom you pass in the street or a shop. It is not uncommon for the diner waitress to assume you want "the usual" or to inquire about your family. There is complacency in knowing everyone else's story; the idiosyncrasies of residents are what comprise a small town, a place to call home.

When I moved away from my childhood home, I embraced the sensation of freedom that a daughter experiences when she packs up and leaves her parents' house. After several years in the outside world, I realized that life had progressed in my absence. The home and people I had remembered and longed for had dissolved. Businesses closed, my family had relocated, and friends had built new lives. The perception of belonging to a place had dwindled to near

¹ Thomas Fredrick Arndt. *Home: Tom Arndt's Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), ix.

extinction. The new impediment to face was how to reclaim what was lost. It was time to make a new home.

TO SOUTH

I have had the opportunity to travel to many places, but I had never felt anything like August in Louisiana. My introduction to Sportsman's Paradise was when my plane landed in Baton Rouge airport. After grabbing my luggage and proceeding to the exit I was greeted by a soggy, relentless heat that radiated through the exit doors.

After a few months of adjusting to a university and an environment that was like no other I had ever experienced, I moved into an apartment next to campus to be closer to school. Living alone for the first time since arriving in Baton Rouge, in a tiny studio apartment that was a little "rough around the edges" and located in a drab and sometimes dangerous part of town, I was suddenly homesick for the unscathed sanctity of my small town. Moreover, I felt quite alone, being separated from the people and environment outside my front door. As a newcomer to this place, confounded by how I would meet those around me, the desire to find a sense of home is what led to the first Neighborhood Photo Booth.

THE CONCEPT

I remember sitting in a photo booth with my sister when I was young. It was a cramped little box with a backdrop, permeated with the odors of chemicals and sweat. Nonetheless, the booth would call to us every time we spotted one. Upon entering, we were transformed by excitement as each photo was taken. The anticipation of a perfect black and white photo strip was met with joy and satisfaction; inconsequential moments would be remembered. It did not have to be a holiday or special occasion; the booth itself celebrated life every day. It was this feeling I wanted to share with my neighbors: an appreciation of a moment itself. I began designing a simple studio based on the ideas that came from research of the first photo booth.

Patented in 1925, the Photomaton (the original name of the photo booth) was invented by Siberian immigrant Anatol Josepho,² himself an itinerant photographer. Josepho had the idea for the “coin-in-the-slot machine, which would automatically photograph the sitter, develop the photographs, dry them and deliver them” (*New York Times*, March 28, 1927). His patent was later purchased by Henry Morgenthau, a former ambassador to Turkey, who planned to make photographs easily and cheaply available to the masses, and accomplish in the photographic field what Woolworth had accomplished in Novelties and Merchandise [and] Ford in Automobiles.”³ An article in *Photo Era* from 1928 described the process:

Into the booths slip wearied suburban shoppers, with packages dangling from every finger; girls “on their lunch hour,” young men who will not be parted from their caps, photo or no photo, and whose mouths are a glitter of gold. One-by-one they take their places under the spotlight, smile widely from left to right and straight, and at last join the waiters by the picture slot. It is as exciting as a roller coaster at a seashore amusement park or an airplane ride.⁴

² Babbette Hines, *Photo booth* (New York: Princeton Architectural press, 2002), 1.

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

The world had found an endless source of fascination since French photographer Louis Daguerre produced the first readily available photographic portraits. “Humans are curious and social animals, who are endlessly fascinated about what people look like, no matter how often we are told looks don’t matter. They *do* matter in that the portraits we scrutinize reflect something of the character of the sitter.”⁵

Historically the photo booth has been the perfect amalgamation of studio photograph, snapshot, and self-portrait, and possesses the greatest advantage of each.⁶ The early photo booths had an attendant to offer slight direction and control, but much less than a regular studio environment. I decided I would make something resembling this to engage and form bonds with my neighbors and neighborhood.

Portraiture was historically for the privileged, but today it appears everywhere but especially on social networking sites. However, I decided to give my neighbors a real filmstrip print, much like the old photo booth, made with traditional black and white materials. In this way, the photograph becomes something more: a precious memento.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.,4.

MY PHOTO BOOTH

First I created a studio outside my front door with only a camera and a Sharpie sign that read “Free Photographs for Neighborhood Picture Project.” Although the studio was not enclosed like the traditional design, the name “photo booth” stuck all the same. A few frames shot, a few poses and smiles, led to the joy that one feels when meeting someone for the first time. Of course, these new friends were excited knowing they would receive a photograph in the mail. I greeted all passers-by, whether in cars or on foot, encouraging them to have their photo taken. I wanted to know my neighbors, and to have them feel comfortable with the fact that we shared this space together. All the different characters that would stop for photographs intrigued me. People choose how they want to be pictured, whether in lipstick and pumps or sweatpants and a tattered t-shirt; they choose their own appearance. Some people find solace in exaggerating expression or pantomiming an activity, others choose to show a quiet endearing pride or just let the sincere emotions of their day seep through.

Initially, I photographed people in their environment with the neighborhood as the background. Gradually I positioned them in front of a neutralizing backdrop, more indicative of a photo booth curtain. This background allowed me to focus further on my subject and allowed hints of the physical neighborhood landscape to show when I saw fit. I welcomed the occasional gust of wind that would move the backdrop, causing subtle changes to each composition. At first I used a 4 x 5-field camera with 400 T-max black and white film. The large camera commanded attention and granted me credibility as an artist to my neighbors, by changing many of their views of modern photography from surveillance to art. Later I switched to a medium-format camera to maneuver more easily, have a more rapid film advance, and to accommodate the growing number of patrons that were visiting the photo booth.

INFLUENCES

My father has asked numerous times, “Who wants a picture of a stranger?” I have never been able to give him a satisfactory answer. However, most of my inspiration comes from photographers like August Sander, Diane Arbus, and Richard Avedon. The concepts and methods involved in their work have been seminal to my view of portrait photography overall, but especially in this project. Their photographs reveal a connection and understanding between the subject and photographer: to document people in real-life conditions, in their everyday lives, in their own backyards.

The work of German photographer August Sander (1876-1964) echoes through all the photographers who inspire me.⁷ He was alive during a turbulent time in history and witnessed Germany’s radical transformation from a predominantly agrarian society to a modern nation state. “Sander believed in a “functional individual existence and an integral collective order. Yet he lived through the complete breakdown of his world under Hitler’s regime.”⁸ He managed to “transform his darkroom into a laboratory for modernity; the republic was equal parts Utopian dream and civic nightmare, a society torn between progressive visions of the future and reactionary longings for the past.”⁹

The work that I am most drawn to is his *Citizens of the Twentieth Century*. This was a portfolio of archetypes devoted to the people. Sander photographed what he believed were the prototypical building blocks of human society, including his own birthplace and childhood home

⁷ August Sander and Weston Naef, *August Sander; photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2000), 5.

⁸ “AUGUST SANDER PORTRAITS FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY Exhibition Dates: Winter 2002-2003,” Andrew Smith Gallery, Accessed March 19, 2012, <http://www.andrewsmithgallery.com/exhibitions/augustsander/sander.htm>.

⁹ Ibid.

in the Westerwald.¹⁰ His photo *The Peasant Woman of the Westerwald* (Fig. 1) reflects what I hope to have brought to my street portraits. The woman in the photograph is shown exhibiting a trusting stare accompanied by exquisite details of her dress and aging skin. So much is revealed about the subject with only a single frame. I aim to communicate the same informative yet ardent perspective to those who view my work. For example, consider the portrait titled *Blue* (Fig. 2).



Figure 1: August Sander, *Peasant Woman of Westerwald*, 1912.

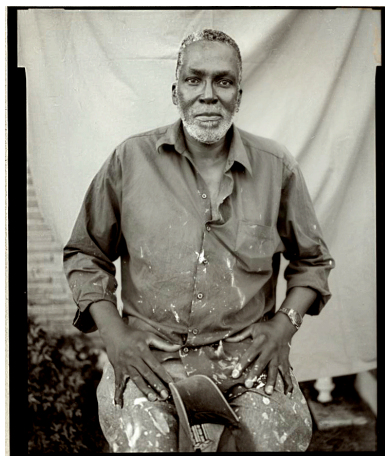


Figure 2: Mercedes Jelinek, *Blue*, 2011.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

Another photographer who has motivated my work was Diane Arbus. She once said while giving a talk at Rhode Island School of Design, “My favorite thing is to go where I’ve never been.”¹¹ Later she added, “[but] sometimes I have a sinking feeling of, Oh God it’s time and I don’t really want to go.” This simple idea stayed with me and connected me to her work. Arbus seemed to bond with people, to have a specific relationship to each of her subjects. This was what made her photographs so hypnotizing. The spontaneity of her character can be seen throughout her work. In her photograph, *Tattooed Man at a Carnival* (Fig. 3), the man gazes directly into the camera. The way he displays himself shows the pride he has in his tattoos, which completes the connection between viewer and photograph. I tried to create a similar feeling in my image *Man at Dusk* (Fig. 4).

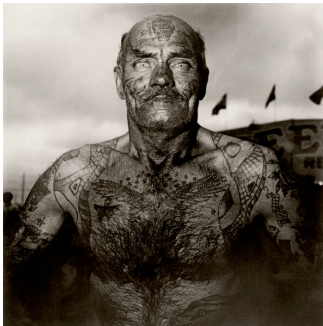


Figure 3: Diane Arbus, *Tattooed Man*, 1970.

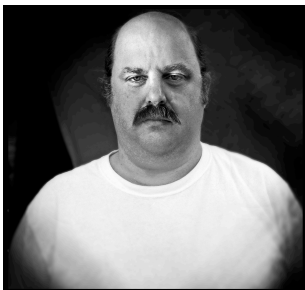


Figure 4: Mercedes Jelinek, *Man at Dusk*, 2011.

¹¹ Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus* (Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1972), Introduction.

In contemporary terms, the most notable influence on my work is Richard Avedon, specifically for the work he made later in his career, entitled *In the American West*. He worked on the portraits over a span of six years in many locations.¹² “His way of working, selecting, engaging, watching faces and torsos and, finally, taking the photograph displayed a formality that he attempted but also an instinctive opportunistic nature to the endeavor at hand.”¹³ He placed his subjects against a stark white background to eliminate the landscape and focused more on the face and figure being photographed.¹⁴ John Rohrbach, the senior Curator of Photographs at the Amon Carter Museum described Avedon’s work as:

[Expanding] the very notion of Public Portraiture, extending the cachet of elegance and heroism generally reserved for politicians, celebrities, models and the wealthy to the purview of those we often ignore. Across these pages come soliloquies from people whom many of us would prefer to step quickly around if encountered in life. Innocently, these people open themselves to the camera, trusting fully in the energetic New Yorker whose intentions they could only surmise. Slightly bemused unexpected, unasked-for attention, they seem to exclaim, “I don’t know quite why you are focusing your camera on me, but yes I’ll go along with your game.” Forthrightly, they declare, “This is who I am.”¹⁵

This way of interacting with subjects was precisely how I approached my project. In a photograph by Laura Wilson (Fig. 5) who photographed Avedon at work, you can see his connection with his subjects. He took time to get to know a little about the people he photographed. This manner of communication, stepping out from behind the camera and assimilating with subjects is what I show in my first video (Fig. 6).

¹² Laura Wilson and Larry McMurtry, *Avedon at Work in the American West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 11.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵ Laura Wilson, John Rohrbach and Richard Avedon, *In The American West, 1979-1984* (New York: Abrams, 2005), Preface.



Figure 5: Laura Wilson, *Avedon at Work*, 1979.



Figure 6: Mercedes Jelinek, *Movie Still*, 2011

The way Avedon placed his figures against a white background (Fig. 7) intrigues me. Being able to control the amount of extraneous detail aided in directing focus to the subject's minute details that might otherwise be overlooked (Fig. 8).



Figure 7: Richard Avedon, Sandra Bennett, 1980.



Figure 8: Mercedes Jelinek, Hair, 2012.

The work of these photographers contains images of the ordinary, real-life, everyday “Joe.” Their photographs elucidate the interactions between photographers and subject so richly that a viewer is left feeling a profound sense of truth. The subjects always seemed to be very accommodating, which sheds insight on how these artists work. What may seem ordinary or mundane was transformed and made momentous through each artist’s style and attention to

detail. They show physical facets of the person—the skin, the dress, the stance—but also hold the emotional weight of each person more powerfully than any of the underlying issues of race, class, gender, age, or sex found in the depictions.

CONCLUSION

This body of work combines concepts of home and community, while also revealing my own growth through the past two years. The *Neighborhood Photo Booth* made a foreign land more inviting and in the process transformed strangers into friends. The exhibited photographs reveal the stages of my journey and portray the most memorable of my interactions. Even though the booth has changed decidedly over time, the essence of the project remains, and I plan to recreate the experience of the photo booth wherever I go. This project will continue until I can include all those who wish to be part of it, and will remain free to all those who partake in it. The *Neighborhood Photo Booth* will continue to show both the grandeur and the grit of the seemingly ubiquitous figures that help create the ambiance of my new home.

THE SHOW



Figure 9: From North to South Show #1, 2012.



Figure 10: From North to South Show #2, 2012.



Figure 11: From North to South Show #3, 2012.



Figure 12: From North to South Show #4, 2012.



Figure 13: From North to South Show #5, 2012.



Figure 14: From North to South Show #6, 2012.



Figure 15: From North to South Show #7, 2012.



Figure 16: From North to South Show #8, 2012



Figure 17: From North to South Show #9, 2012.



Figure 18: From North to South Show #10, 2012.



Figure 19: From North to South Show #11, 2012.



Figure 20: From North to South Show #12, 2012.

THE WORK

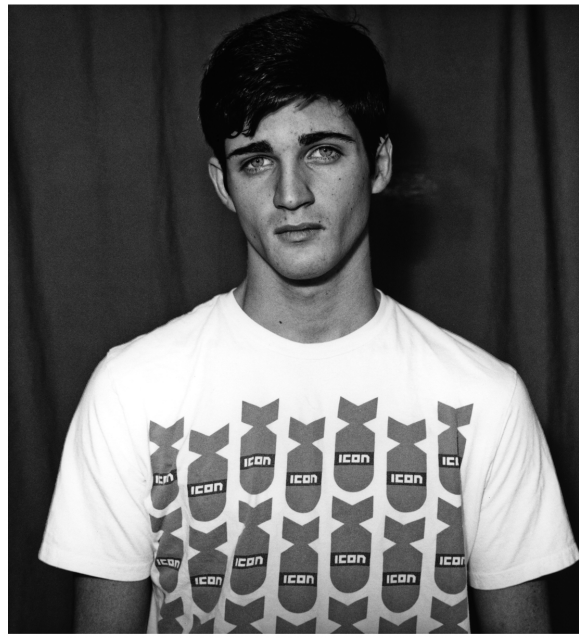
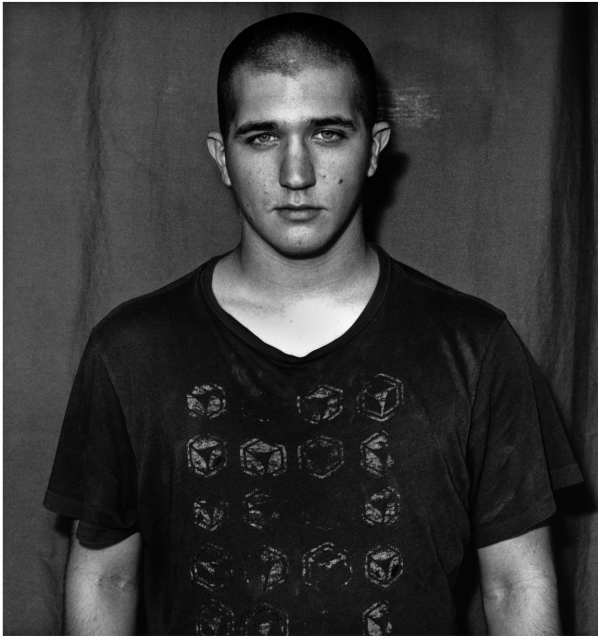


Figure 21: Mercedes Jelinek, Brothers, 2012.



Figure 22: Mercedes Jelinek, Teeth, 2012.

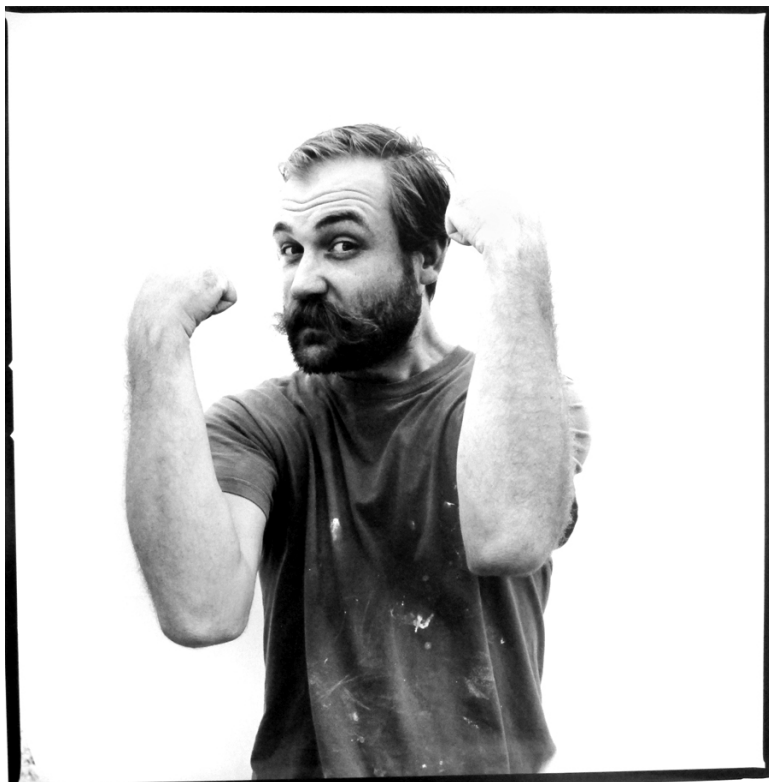


Figure 23: Mercedes Jelinek, *Fighter*, 2012.



Figure 24: Mercedes Jelinek, *Jeb*, 2012.



Figure 25: Mercedes Jelinek, *Nude*, 2012.

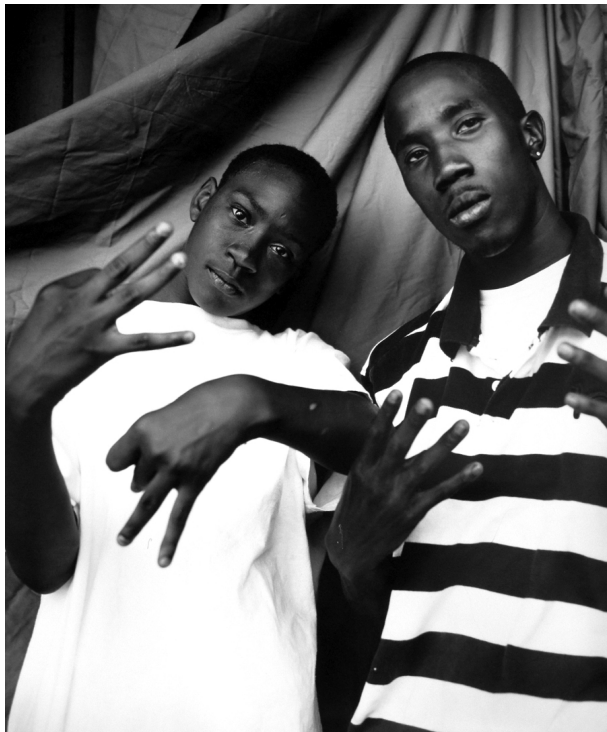


Figure 26: Mercedes Jelinek, *W.R. Boys*, 2012.

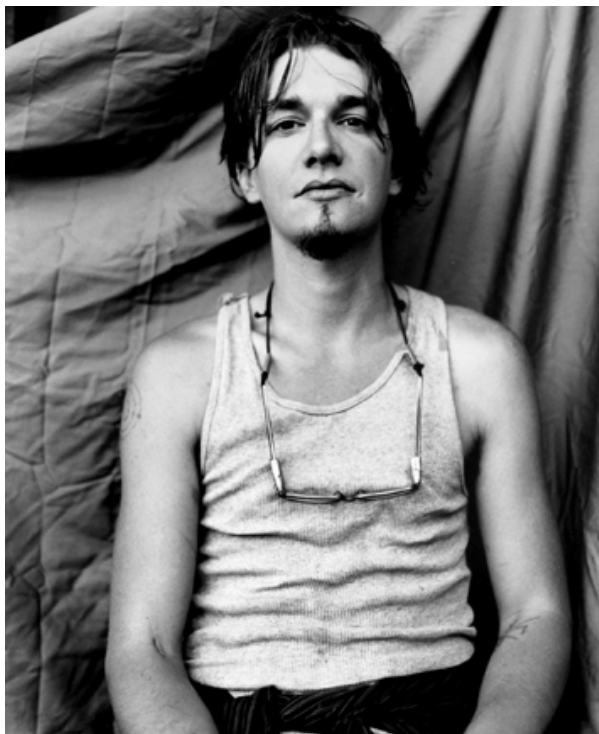


Figure 27: Mercedes Jelinek, Glasses, 2012.



Figure 28: Mercedes Jelinek, Baby, 2012.



Figure 29: Mercedes Jelinek, Charles, 2012.



Figure 30: Mercedes Jelinek, Hunter, 2012.

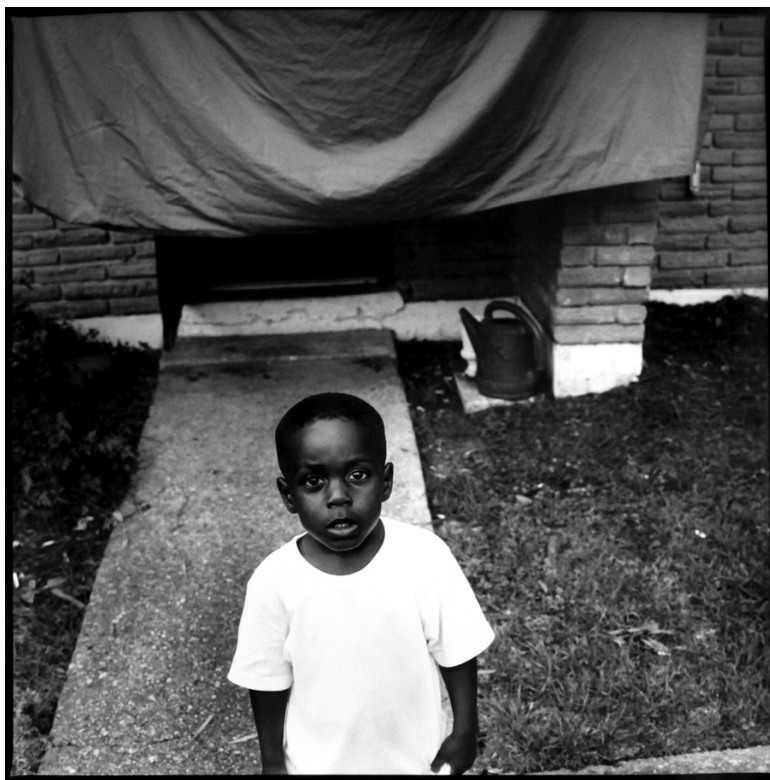


Figure 31: Mercedes Jelinek, Boy #12, 2012.



Figure 32: Mercedes Jelinek, Gardeners, 2012.



Figure 33: Mercedes Jelinek, *Chicken*, 2012.

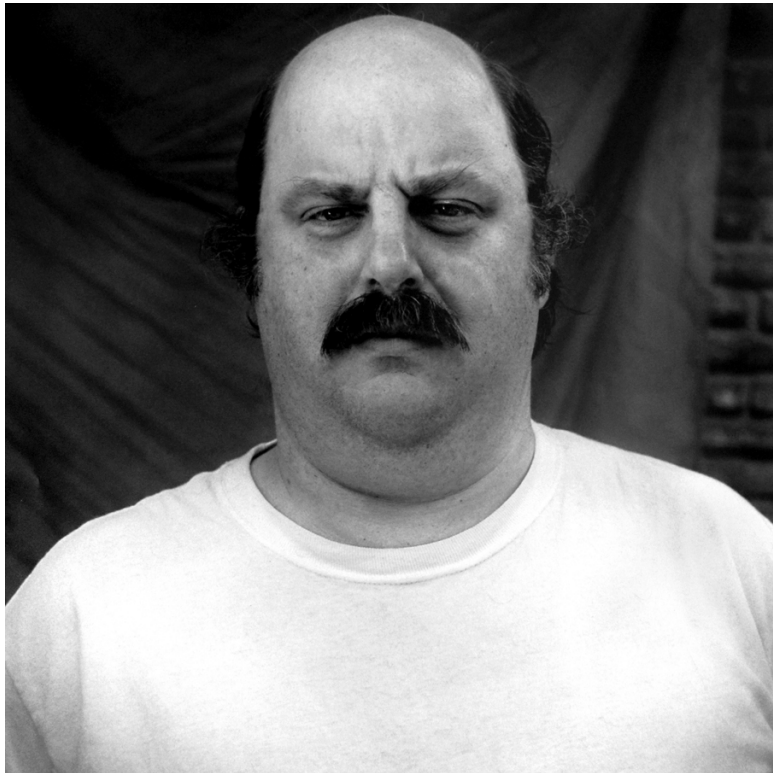


Figure 34: Mercedes Jelinek, *Man at Dusk*, 2012.



Figure 35: Mercedes Jelinek, Man #50, 2012.



Figure 36: Mercedes Jelinek, Hair, 2012.



Figure 37: Mercedes Jelinek, 3 Girls, 2012.



Figure 38: Mercedes Jelinek, Father and Daughter, 2012.

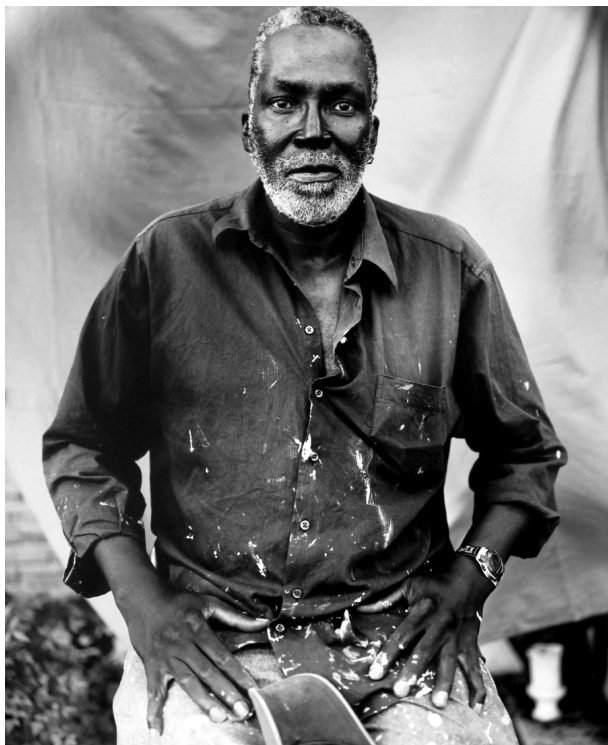


Figure 39: Mercedes Jelinek, Blue, 2012.



Figure 40: Mercedes Jelinek, Hand, 2012.

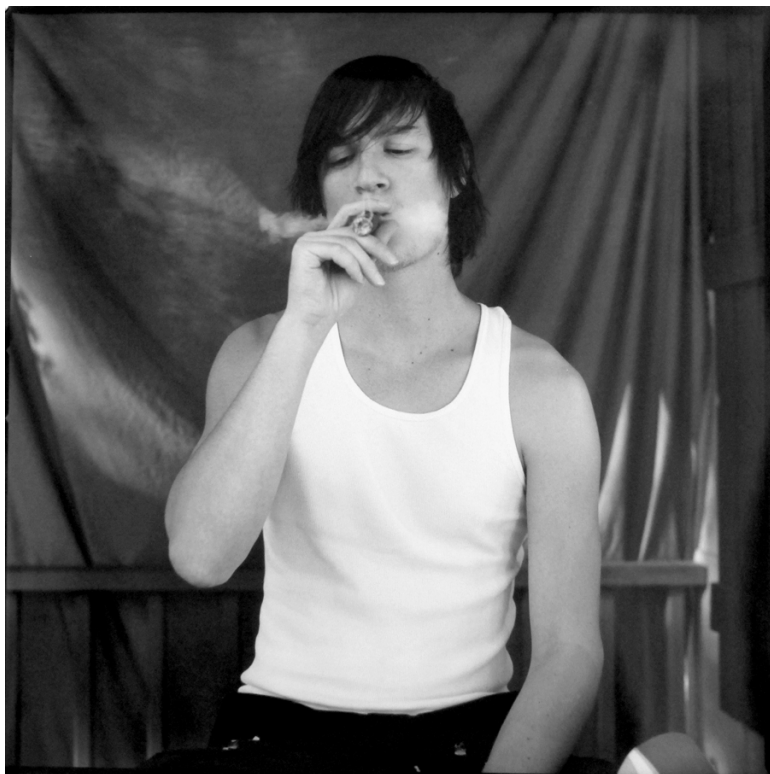


Figure 41: Mercedes Jelinek, Sebastian, 2012.



Figure 42: Mercedes Jelinek, Boat, 2012.



Figure 43: Mercedes Jelinek, Andre, 2012.

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VITA

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